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## **New Directions for Boundaryless Careers: Agency and Interdependence in a Changing World**

Svenja Tams  
School of Management  
University of Bath  
Bath BA2 7AY, UK  
Tel: +44 1225 386 683  
Email: s.tams@bath.ac.uk

Michael B. Arthur  
Suffolk University, Beacon Hill  
8 Ashburton Place  
Boston, MA 02108-2770  
Tel: +1-617-573-8357  
Email: marthur@suffolk.edu

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Key words: careers; agency; context; interdependence; interdisciplinary; individual differences; critical management studies; sociology; social construction

## **New Directions for Boundaryless Careers: Agency and Interdependence in a Changing World**

### **Abstract**

This article reconnects to the intellectual climate from which the formulation of the boundaryless career perspective emerged in the 1990s. Based on 17 years of cumulative research, we develop the case for extending beyond a primary focus on boundaryless careers as forms (e.g. contractor or global itinerant). We argue that opportunities for further theory development in this field can emerge from addressing some of its fundamental debates, and developing a more systematic understanding of career agency. In this respect, we see promise in research that develops our understanding of interdependent notions of career agency. To guide further research, the article identifies six features of agency related to individual variation, social referencing, practice, outcomes, contexts, and learning. We propose that each of these illustrates contrasting assumptions about independent and interdependent views of the career. We discuss how the other articles of this special issue inform our understanding of these six features and identify promising directions for further research. We conclude that the future relevance of the boundaryless career perspective will depend on its openness to the challenges of careers within the inherently dynamic, uncertain and complex arena of an interdependent global society.

## **New Directions for Boundaryless Careers: Agency and Interdependence in a Changing World**

In the early 1990s, fresh thinking about the nature of careers took hold. Profound changes in the ways practitioners redesigned – and scholars rethought – organizations, was reflected in a debate about the changing nature of work in a changing economy. The 1993 theme of the Academy of Management annual meeting was “The Boundaryless Organization” which in turn gave rise to a modest symposium proposal on “The Boundaryless Career.” This was quickly followed by a *JOB* special issue and wider book collection on the same topic (Arthur, 1994; Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). Central to the emerging debate was the argument that there were new forms of careers depending increasingly on criteria determined by the external environment (such as marketability of expertise), external networks and information, and less on traditional organizational career arrangements (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996: 6).

In this article, our aim is to reconnect to the intellectual climate from which the formulation of the boundaryless career perspective emerged in the 1990s. At that time, the intention was to widen our perspective on careers beyond a focus on single organizational settings. Based on 17 years of cumulative research in this field, we develop the case for extending the boundaryless career perspective beyond a focus on different forms – such as contractor, project worker, entrepreneur, or global itinerant. We also seek to avoid an overly individualistic view of agency in boundaryless careers, and with it assumptions about the pursuit of “independence” from institutions. We go on to argue that opportunities for further theory development in this field can emerge from addressing some of its fundamental debates, and developing a more systematic understanding of career agency and its interdependencies. The six further articles in this collection each provide interesting examples of how this question can be addressed.

Drawing on established career scholarship (Arthur et al., 1989) and sociological thinking (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), we define career agency as a process of work-related social engagement, informed by past experiences and future possibilities, through which an individual invests in his or her career. We review four perspectives that have, respectively, focused on: a changing economy, identity and adaptability, resistance, and interaction with institutions. We suggest that novel insights can emerge at the intersections between these perspectives. We go on to propose six complementary features of agency, related to its individual variation, social referencing, practice, outcomes, context, and learning. All of these features allow us to contrast approaches emphasizing independence with those emphasizing interdependence. Finally, we suggest that the relevance of these features is derived from their application to the changing global arena of boundaryless careers.

### **The emergence of the “boundaryless career”**

Any account of the emergence of the boundaryless career perspective needs to begin with the career studies initiative launched by scholars at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) back in the mid-1970s, led by Lotte Bailyn, Edgar Schein and John Van Maanen. The emphasis in that work was on *organizational* careers – careers unfolding in a single organizational setting. Yet, the MIT scholars’ emphasis on an interdisciplinary approach, the interdependence of the subjective and objective careers, the importance of career processes over time, and the relevance of “the interrelated and interdependent concepts

of role, reference group, expectation, motivation and identity,” (Van Maanen, 1977: 4) apply equally to boundaryless career thinking (Arthur, 2008). Moreover, Van Maanen and Schein (1977: 36) offered the following definition of career development:

“[A] lifelong process of working out a synthesis between individual interests and the opportunities (or limitations) present in the external work-related environment, so that both individual and environmental objectives are fulfilled.”

This definition, which references the environment rather than any single organization, is robust enough to accommodate anything that boundaryless career thinking would bring in almost twenty years later.

Fast forward to the 1993 annual meeting of the Academy of Management in Atlanta. The meeting’s theme was “The Boundaryless Organization,” reflecting an idea popularized by General Electric chief Jack Welch to promote greater adaptability and responsibility-taking across the company’s workforce. Michael Arthur and Robert DeFillippi proposed a symposium to apply a similar approach to our thinking about people’s careers. Three years on, Arthur and Rousseau (1996: 3) affirmed the idea that boundaryless careers involved a range of forms that are distinct from careers built upon traditional employment assumptions – such as the promise of vertical career trajectories in large, stable firms. Specifically, they suggested six forms: (1) careers that involve mobility across the boundaries of separate employers, (2) careers that draw validation or marketability from outside the current employer, (3) careers that depend more on external networks and information than internal structures, (4) careers where hierarchical reporting and advancement principles are broken, (5) careers that are primarily constructed around personal and family commitments, and (6) careers that individuals perceive to be relatively free from structural constraints (1996: 6).

Consistent with the above range of forms, DeFillippi and Arthur (1996: 116) defined boundaryless careers as “sequences of job opportunities that go beyond the boundaries of single employment settings.” The statement that such careers “go beyond” boundaries points to a semantic weakness in the focal term. However, it was a term that provided a direct response to the Academy of Management’s 1993 theme. It was also an evocative term, as evidenced by scholars’ immediate and subsequent willingness to adopt it in further debate.

Raising attention to a wider range of possible career forms responded to the changing economic context of that time. Jack Welch’s notion of the “boundaryless organization” epitomized two trends that were reconfiguring organizational fields and employment. One involved large organizations refocusing on core activities, delayering middle-management, and rapidly outsourcing previously in-house service and production activities, adding to evidence of systemic change in earlier, primarily organizationally-defined employment arrangements (Miles & Snow, 1986; Kanter, 1989; Prahalad & Hamel, 1990). Also, large state-owned monopolies within utilities, transport and communications sectors were being dismantled, as were assumptions of relatively stable, long-term employment within these sectors. Growing privatization and shareholder influence accentuated a focus on entrepreneurship, accountability, and performance, but also increased the risks for employment. In reflecting on the debates of the day, Arthur and Rousseau pointed to reports that the median employment tenure was just four and a half years for US workers, six years for US managers, and – in contrast to popular reports – only eight years for Japanese male

workers. The empirical context of employment was undergoing, or arguably had undergone, fundamental transformation calling for fresh research and career management that would help individuals situated in this changing context.

In parallel to this reconfiguration of large organizations, a second trend was reflected in the underlying debate about the changing nature of industrial economy. Michael Porter had popularized the broad applicability of the “regional advantage” model in a major publication on “The Competitive Advantage of Nations” (Porter, 1990). California’s “Silicon Valley” high technology cluster was providing a powerful example of regional advantage based on employment mobility and new firm formation (Saxenian, 1994). Accordingly, networking and its consequences were a major subject of inquiry at both inter-organizational and inter-personal levels of analysis (Nohria & Eccles, 1992; Burt, 1992). Other high-growth industries, such as the biotechnology industry, were also being cast as dependent on the quality of interpersonal networks and in turn innovation that drove the industry forward (Powell et al., 1996). Studies of the independent film industry illustrated the way an industry could sustain production through a series of project-based companies, each charged to simply produce a new film and disband (e.g. Jones, 1996). For individuals pursuing careers within such a context, this implied the need to engage in external networks and build personal connections that made knowledge transfer and new learning possible.

These economic trends were complemented by psychological views of *protean* careers – careers that could “change shape” in response to changing external circumstances (Hall, 1996). Moreover, scholars started to emphasize that psychological success could not only be determined based on prevailing organization-defined criteria, such as advancement and economic reward. Increasingly, subjective criteria such as relational commitments to family, friends and communities and personal development could be considered equally important as objective criteria of career success (Bailyn, 1993; Marshall, 1995; Mirvis & Hall, 1994). This perspective added weight to the argument that careers are not only subject to changing external circumstances, but that people can contribute more directly to their own career futures.

In sum, this emerging debate raised attention to three themes that would continue shaping subsequent scholarship: First, it became evident that reliance on stable employment within large organizations was an increasingly problematic assumption. This suggested the need to reduce individuals’ dependence on any single organization and, in turn, strengthen their personal responsibility for learning and adaptability within increasingly flexible and uncertain career contexts (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1996; Hall, 1996). Second, the awareness was growing that a more networked and learning-oriented economy could provide opportunities for careers to proactively contribute to and shape that economy (Arthur, Inkson & Pringle, 1999; Weick, 1996). Third, there was the aspiration that these wider social changes were also associated with individuals crafting careers in ways that were more aligned with their personal values and relational commitments outside of work (Mirvis & Hall, 1994). All three remain significant today.

### **Unfolding debate: independence versus dependence**

Consistent with the original objective of drawing attention to a wider spectrum of career forms, both within and across organizations, subsequent scholarship provides a more

fine-grained understanding of careers that depend more on external labor markets and occupational identities than on organizational criteria, alone. They include: contingent workers (Marler, Barringer & Milkovich, 2002), highly skilled contractors (Barley & Kunda, 2006; King, Perberton & Burke, 2005), project workers (Jones, 1996; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006), interim managers (Inkson, Heising & Rousseau, 2001), entrepreneurs (Higgins, 2005; Jones, 2001), and global itinerants (Janssens, Cappellen, & Zanoni, 2006; Stahl, Miller & Tung, 2002).

However, cumulative research on boundaryless careers over the past 15 years has also shown that focusing on distinct career forms and employment relationships can bring about two kinds of risk. One is of ignoring similarities across different forms (Pang, Chua, & Chu, 2008; Zaleska & de Menezes, 2007). For example, production workers employed in hierarchically integrated firms may face similar job security and learning challenges as those employed by subcontractors. Another risk is ignoring variations within particular forms (Marler et al., 2002; Pringle & Mallon, 2003). For example, an employer's policy of flexible work arrangements may be only available to certain privileged groups of workers.

Opening our eyes to a wider range of career forms points to the larger task of examining what may be generalizable dynamics across them. What, though, are promising directions for such examination? We suggest that opportunities may emerge at the fault lines of unresolved debates. As we step back from the contribution made by particular studies, we see a field far from removed from any uniform voice. If the research can be synthesized at all, it is as a polarized debate about the relative independence or dependence of careers from institutional career scripts.

On the one hand, a considerable body of literature provides evidence for the importance of studying careers that depend more on personally-defined criteria than on organizationally-sanctioned career scripts. This argument is reflected in research examining self-direction with respect to mid-career change (Ibarra, 2003; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005) and international careers (Janssens et al., 2006; Stahl et al., 2002). It is also evident in studies examining subjective aspects of careers such as calling (Hall & Chandler, 2005; Wrzesniewski, McCauley & Rozin, 1997), authenticity (Svejenova, 2005), and protean career orientations (Briscoe, Hall & DeMuth, 2006; Briscoe, Hoobler & Byle, in press). The evidence suggests that career actions cannot be adequately understood by focusing exclusively on the institutional context, such as HRM practices, but that personal preferences mediate how individuals seek to find their path through institutions.

On the other hand, research over the past decade has also demonstrated that it would be a fallacy to assume that boundaryless careers (defined by their relative independence from organizations) could be constructed independently of contextual constraints and boundaries (Gunz, Evans & Jalland, 2000; Mayerhofer, Meyer & Steyrer, 2007). Boundaryless careers are dependent on employment settings (Higgins, 2005), labor market intermediaries (Cappelli & Hamori, 2007; King et al., 2005), industry fields (Jones, 2001, Peterson & Anand, 2002), and the institutional resources conveyed through social networks and occupational groups (Barley & Kunda, 2006; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006; Zeitz et al., 2009). They are also shaped by cultural expectations and ethnicity (Ituma & Simpson, 2009; Pringle & Mallon, 2003), popular sentiments (Wrzesniewski, 2002), and global socio-economic trends (Tams & Arthur,

2007; Tams & Marshall, 2010). Research examining careers within these wider institutional and cultural contexts challenges any unbridled notion of career agency.

### **Perspectives on career agency**

Against this backdrop, the question of how scholars see the relationship between career agency and its institutional structures remains a central concern for those looking at career development, the “lifelong process of working out a synthesis between individual interests and [environmental] opportunities (or limitations)” (Van Maanen & Schein, 1977: 36). However, engagement with the notion of agency remains fragmented in current career theory (Mayrhofer, Meyer et al., 2007). One reason for this state is the range of disciplinary positions adopted by scholars. However, rather than advocating any one position, we suggest that a more explicit interdisciplinary framing of career research may offer novel and richer insights (Arthur, 2008). Critical to such an interdisciplinary approach is an appreciation of the contributions that different perspectives can make. In what follows, we illustrate this across four different perspectives.

*Adapting to a changing economy.* Agency has been a central, yet often conceptually implicit theme in the first wave of boundaryless career literature. A strong impetus for this framing of careers has been a concern about enabling individuals to engage effectively within the context of changing and modernizing social structures. This engagement would need to take account of increasingly market-oriented and uncertain labor markets, and also recognize that technological innovation and global interdependencies were creating opportunities for new forms of working. The impetus is illustrated by literature offering guidance on how individuals can survive, advance, and be enterprising within a changing economy (e.g. Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; DeFillippi & Arthur, 1996; Eby, Butts & Lockwood, 2003; Higgins, 2001; Peiperl, Arthur & Anand, 2002). It acknowledges that individuals have some scope to influence social structures, in particular through bottom-up entrepreneurial enactment at the underspecified (or weak) margins of the institutional status quo (Arthur, Inkson & Pringle, 1999; Jones, 1996; Weick, 1996).

One particular influence on subsequent literature has been DeFillippi and Arthur’s (1996) suggestion that individuals’ shaping of boundaryless careers is related to those individuals’ knowing-why (motivation and identity), knowing-how (skills and expertise), and knowing-whom (relationships and reputation) career investments. This model suggests that career agency involves complementary dimensions, related to the work being performed and the relationships around that work. However, the first wave of literature did not unravel deeper questions about how agency can influence embedded institutional constellations and power.

*Identity and adaptability.* In parallel, scholarship on new career phenomena adopting a psychological (and typically humanistic) frame informs our understanding of agency at the micro-level. It links agency to individuals’ identity-development and adaptability, and examines its psychological facets such as sources of self-direction, values and personal capabilities (Briscoe & Hall, 2006; Hall & Chandler, 2005). This framing of careers often places questions about psychological dependence and independence from organizationally-defined career scripts at the centre of attention and points to the meaning-building, self-actualizing and liberating potential of career agency (e.g. Hall, 1996; Mainiero & Sullivan,



2005; Sheppard, 1984; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). This literature suggests that agency can be achieved by valuing and asserting subjective definitions of career success, even though these may be at odds with dominant institutional success criteria. Moreover, it helps us to see career agency as being derived from life-long learning and identity development (Hall & Chandler, 2005; Ibarra, 2003).

More recent research also points to limitations of framing career agency exclusively in psychological terms. For example, Briscoe, Hoobler and Byle (forthcoming) find that leaders with a protean career orientation (expressing a self-directed and values-based approach) are perceived to be effective transformational leaders by their subordinates, but not by peers and superiors. Overall, a psychological approach has contributed with a more fine-grained understanding of the subjective aspects of career agency. However, since it has traditionally framed personal development as an intrinsic process, it has provided less insight into the processes and practices by which career agents engage with their context and can alter embedded institutional structures.

*Resistance.* Critical management scholars have suggested an inherently political, but also more skeptical view of career agency. In contrast to a humanistic framing of the individual-organizational tension as one of (psychological) dependence versus interdependence, they frame this tension in terms of control versus resistance, or precarious identity and belonging. Critical authors shed light on power inequalities in flexible and networked ways of working; unmask the political and economic interests driving these work arrangements; and reveal how the “marketization” of careers can deplete established relationships (Blair, Culkin & Randle, 2003; Sennett, 1998).

Some authors have suggested that apparent agency may be little more than powerful institutional interests pushing the risks of uncertain markets onto individuals, under labels of “self-directedness” and “individual responsibility” (Ehrenreich, 2005; Ekinsmyth, 2002). A more optimistic portrayal of agency is offered by critical scholars who see it as individuals resisting the dominant discourse of their organization through strategies such as disengagement (Marshall, 1995; Gabriel, 2008), articulating one’s voice (Bell et al., 2003), and joining collective change movements (Scully & Segal, 2003).

*Interacting with institutions.* The most explicit treatment of agency has been offered by career scholars responding to traditional sociological arguments that taken-for-granted interpretive schemes, norms and practices constrain career action (Zucker, 1977; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The treatment has frequently referenced Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory to suggest the possibility for individuals to express some agency despite the pervasive power of institutions (Barley, 1989; Duberley, Cohen & Mallon, 2006). For example, Barley’s (1989) career structuration theory suggests that people draw on institutional resources, interpretive schemes, and norms when they enact career scripts in novel ways, and that this can eventually alter institutions. Duberley and colleagues (2006) extend this idea, suggesting that aside from institutional resources, individuals also draw on other resources and personal considerations when they interpret institutional career scripts.

However, the limitations to career agency are emphasized by another stream of sociological scholarship, arguing that shared meanings and practices extend beyond single organizations and are reproduced across “organizational fields” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This literature points to the importance of individuals signaling their competence (Jones,

2002; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006), generating institutional resources (Barley & Kunda, 2006; Zeitz et al., 2009), and developing structurally advantageous positions to gatekeepers (King et al., 2005).

In sum, scholars' disciplinary perspectives have shaped how questions about agency and structure in careers are approached. While the first wave of boundaryless career literature raises our attention to the challenges of a changing economy, literature examining identity and adaptability provides a more nuanced understanding of variations in individual agency. Alternative perspectives that examine how people resist and interact with institutions emphasize how agency references institutional contexts and social identities, how it enacts socially-shaped practices and resources, and where its limits are. Although the above frames are not exhaustive, our main point is that new directions for research on career agency may be found at the margins and intersections of these perspectives, challenging their conventional assumptions about career agency.

### **Conceptualizing agency: Bringing in interdependence**

The discussion so far has suggested that boundaryless careers cannot be constructed independently of institutional and cultural contexts, that overly independent notions of career agency are problematic, and that its conceptualizations need to be broadened. In this section we propose six features of agency, and for each of them we highlight contrasting assumptions about independent and interdependent views of the career. These contrasts are summarized in Table 1. The illustrations we offer reveal that independent and interdependent assumptions are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but rather place different emphases.

The proposed six features are grounded in our earlier review of debates about boundaryless careers and the contributions made by the other articles of this special issue. In this sense, our framework conceptualizes agency more broadly than any of the particular theories that career scholars frequently reference, such as Giddens' (1994) structuration theory or other models. We acknowledge that neither the six features nor their illustrations are necessarily exhaustive. However, they provide a framework for both appreciating the contributions to this special issue and for encouraging further research.

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*Individual variation.* Observable differences in people's attitudes and behavior across similar situations point to individual variations of agency. Perspectives that view individual differences as primarily independent and distinct from the external environment, locate the source of individual variations in agency in people's personality, cognitions, affective states, expectancies, motives, and biographical variables. This approach has been central to personality research examining how individual differences predict career self-management and job search outcomes (Kanfer, Wanberg & Kantrowitz, 2001; O'Reilly & Chatman, 1994). In this sense, personality research helps to differentiate between people who have "more" agency and those who have "less." Along similar lines, Bakan (1966) identified "agency" and "communion" as two distinct personality dispositions – with agency describing the tendency to be self-assertive and control the environment, and communion reflecting participation in the collective and being open to others.

Alternatively, an interdependent approach of accounting for individual variations in agency acknowledges their socially constructed nature (Berger & Luckman, 1966). This perspective seeks to explain individual differences in agency in terms of culturally-shaped beliefs and social identity – including gender and organizational or professional membership. For example, social and cross-cultural psychology observe cultural and gendered differences in the ways by which individuals construe self and their relationship to others, and that these differences influence cognitions, emotions, and motivations (Cross, Bacon & Morris, 2000; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In this issue, findings from a large scale survey lead Forret, Sullivan and Mainiero (2010) to observe that traditional gender roles still shape women and men's response to unemployment, despite the profound economic and socio-cultural changes in North American society. Zikic, Bonache and Cerdin (2010) also identify individual variations in the career agency of qualified immigrants, advancing a range of explanations – both in terms of personality and socially shaped dynamics, including immigrants' social identity.

*Social referencing.* The social referencing of agency acknowledges that agency derives its purpose from the circumstances upon which people seek to act. In this sense, the social referencing of agency is always interdependent with its environment. This feature of agency is conceptually grounded in structuration theory and its central argument that agency occurs when people step away from blindly following and reproducing established structural conventions, and instead, alter these conventions through their actions (Giddens, 1998: 87). As discussed earlier, career structuration theory refines this argument by suggesting that people's actions and interactions reference institutional career scripts (Barley, 1989). Consistent with a boundaryless career perspective, empirical research suggests that the referencing of career agency represents an iterative and on-going process by which individuals integrate a range of contextual considerations, resources, and discourses into their unfolding and dynamic career stories (Cohen, Duberley & Mallon, 2004; Duberley et al, 2006). Cappellen and Janssens (2010), in this issue, further inform our understanding of social referencing. They explain the career strategies, which global managers adopt to redress the limitations of their organizations' Human Resource practices, by suggesting that these managers reference their self-directed career management with regards to the global economy.

We can nonetheless distinguish between relatively more independent versus interdependent ways of referencing career agency. Recent debates about possession of a "calling" illustrate this. The referencing of agency is more independent when it is grounded in personal priorities and goals. This is implied in a definition of calling as being primarily motivated by the pursuit of psychological definitions of career success (Mirvis & Hall, 1994) and a view that the work one is doing is one's purpose of life (Hall & Chandler, 2005). In contrast, a more interdependent interpretation is evident when agency references significant others (Bailyn, 1993), reference groups (Bosley, Arnold & Cohen, 2009; Lawrence, 2006), institutions (e.g. Pang et al., 2008) and society (Tams & Marshall, 2010). From an interdependent perspective, calling derives its primary purpose from service to a larger cause such as one's occupation and moral duty (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Weber, 1930), social usefulness (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997), and public debates about social and environmental responsibility (Tams & Marshall, 2010).

*Practice.* Central to the notion of career agency are the actions and practices by which individuals seek to act upon their environment. A considerable body of research has examined career agency that is expressed by individuals, for example in job search activities (Kanfer et al., 2001), career self management and change (Ibarra, 2003; King, 2004), networking (Ingram & Morris, 2007), managing one's image (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Svejenova, 2005), and "stretchwork" to advance careers in external labor markets (O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006).

More interdependent interpretations of career agency are expressed through collaborative and contextually situated practices. These are particularly relevant to the ambiguous and entrepreneurial context of many boundaryless careers (Weick, 1996). For example, this can involve participating and brokering in professional networks because one recognizes the wider collaborative rather than personal opportunities (Obstfeld, 2005). As Barley and Kunda (2006) argue, participation in occupational communities can enable collective agency among contract workers in the IT sector. This can provide career support to individuals while contributing to a distinct professional identity within the wider economy. In this issue, Svejenova, Vives and Alvarez (2010) advance the notion of the 'shared career' to theorize the interdependent practice of career agency by two or more individuals over extended periods of time.

*Outcomes.* While the purpose of career agency is to act upon certain conditions, the outcomes of such actions are less clear. As critical management scholars have argued, careers may increasingly be shaped by a discourse of self-improvement, continuous learning and individual responsibility. However, that is not to say that individual agency is allowing individuals to escape precarious dependencies on powerful institutions (e.g. Ehrenreich, 2005; Ekinsmyth, 2002; Gabriel, 2008; Sennett, 1998). We may acknowledge that the most reliable sense of personal agency can be derived from the daily practice of doing one's craft (Sennett, 2008) or from making subjectively meaningful and empowering career choices (e.g. Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005). Yet, questions remain about the objective career outcomes of such choices, in particular with regards to the effects on physical career mobility, income and status. In this issue, Jones (2010) widens our perspective on the outcomes of career agency, by examining how the social and symbolic networks of architects influence their professional recognition and perceptions of eminence within wider institutional fields.

It is therefore important to ask whether people's practice of agency brings about the intended effects, what are its conditions for success, and what are its unintended consequences? Also, when are interdependent approaches to enacting agency more effective than independent ones, and what practices can explain collective outcomes such as the creation of new institutional fields (e.g., Higgins, 2005; Jones, 2001)? There is a particular, need for further research examining whether agency that results from changing career orientations (Hall, 1996; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005) has any effect on organizational career management and other societal outcomes. To address these questions, further research will require a more systematic use of longitudinal methods, and cross-pollination between careers and HRM research.

*Contexts.* Attention to the contexts in which agency is situated is essential to unpack the relationship between people's enactment of agency and its outcomes. Contexts both "shape and are shaped by the individuals who interact within them" (Griffin, 2007: 859). In

this respect, contexts exist across levels of analysis and over time (Griffin, 2007; Mayrhofer, Meyer & Steyrer, 2007). An independent approach conceives contexts as an objective reality, external to the individual. Another approach is to see contexts and individual agency as mutually enacted through collaborative practices (Griffin, 2007). This framing of context is particularly relevant at the micro-level, in looking at interactions among career actors (Barley, 1989; Weick, 1996).

An interdependent framing of agency also acknowledges the multilayered nature of contexts spanning from the immediate context of interpersonal interactions and organizations to macro forces at the levels of industries, the economy, national cultures, and society (Mayrhofer et al., 2007). While some of these contextual spheres are more amenable to mutual enactment, others will be less so and possibly beyond the reach of individual agency. An interdependent framing will also consider that the relationship between agency and its contexts changes over time (Emirbeyer & Mische, 1998). Jones' (2001) historical analysis of the evolution of the nascent film industry offers one of the few examples of how to account for interdependencies between agency and changes in its context over time. Jones' (2010) study is also relevant here. It takes a different approach by distinguishing different aspects of context – social versus symbolic networks – to examine the possibilities for and limitation of individual agency.

*Learning.* The above five features raise attention to the possibility for learning from work experiences over time. Learning enables people to revise the practices by which they pursue agency, evaluate outcomes, and adapt to different contexts. If the framing of learning emphasizes independence, it is primarily associated with a person's generation of experiences, knowledge and expertise in ways that give rise to adaptation of their behaviors and career strategies. For example, a salesperson may get to know his or her customers over time, develop skills in responding to their needs, and in turn reference those skills in seeking a future sales management role.

An interdependent view gives consideration to the socially constructed nature of learning (Berger & Luckman, 1966), acknowledging that individual consciousness and subjective meanings are socially produced, and that individuals internalize socially produced "facts" as taken-for-granted knowledge through socialization processes. Higgins' (2005) study of biotechnology entrepreneurs illustrates this theme. She observed that people's early socialization in distinct, entrepreneurial organizational cultures left a lasting "career imprint" that determined individual and collective agency over the course of subsequent career transitions. In this issue, Higgins, Dobrow and Roloff (2010) suggest that a person's participation in career-related networks can have profound effects on their optimism, and thereby their outlook at and interpretation of experiences.

In sum, the above six features of agency – individual variation, social referencing, practice, outcome, contexts, and learning – suggest different ways of bridging between independent and interdependent approaches.

### **Advancing research on career agency**

In this last section, we acknowledge more explicitly how the other articles in this issue have informed the articulation of the previously discussed six features of agency. In this respect, we are also exploring the connections between different features of agency. For

consistency, the sequence of articles below mirrors the sequence of the six features of career agency (and therefore in no way reflects any editorial ranking).

Forret, Sullivan and Mainiero's (2010) article "Gender role differences in reactions to unemployment: Exploring psychological mobility and boundaryless careers" informs us about individual variations in agency. The article examines gender role differences in psychological mobility – that is, in people's capacity to envision a variety of career options – in the transition to unemployment. The profound gender differences that the authors observe between women and men with children challenge uniform definitions of career agency. Whereas men with children grounded their identity within a breadwinner's role and were more likely to perceive unemployment as a defeat, women referenced alternative roles such as care-giver and were more likely to perceive unemployment as an opportunity. This referencing of agency in social roles is also supported by the authors' observations that those traditional gender differences did not apply to women without children. Overall, this article brings to our attention to importance of considering the different ways by which people construct career agency, and that this construction is socially-shaped, referencing the person's wider social roles.

Zikic, Bonache and Cerdin's (2010) "Crossing national boundaries: A typology of qualified immigrants' career orientations" offers a qualitative study examining objective-subjective career interdependencies across a sample of 45 qualified immigrants from three countries. Their distinction of three career orientations (as any of embracing, adaptive or resisting) emphasizes the subjective side of the career, that is, individual variations of agency. We see these individual variations to result from both immigrants' strong personal motives and social identities and relational obligations. Notwithstanding, the career orientations bring to light interdependencies with other features of agency. The features of practice and context are illustrated by the authors' description of how the different immigrant groups seek to overcome barriers and develop social and cultural capital. The link to outcomes is indicated by their distinct approaches to evaluating career success. The subjective notion of career orientation, then, suggests that distinct differences in qualified immigrants' interpretation and enactment of their careers can potentially shape persistent patterns of action and outcome. In some instances these lead to proactive learning, in other instances to fatalistic resignation.

Cappellen and Janssens (2010) in "Enacting global careers: Organizational career scripts and the global economy as co-existing career referents" report how global managers from three organizations respond to the limitations of their employers' career management. The particular contribution of this article lies in providing insights into the interdependencies between the referencing of career agency, its practice and context. The authors observe that global managers derive their agency from referencing multiple career contexts—in this case, the perceived demands of careers in the global economy and organizational career management practices. We come to see globalization as a salient career context that co-structures individuals' enactment of their careers. The findings also show that the overlaps and incongruence between multiple contexts create a potential for agency that deviates from organizational conventions. The range of practices by which individuals respond to (or "act upon") the particularities of the human resource management structures within each of the three organizations also suggests agency as a notion that is enacted within and in response to particular contexts.

Svejenova, Vives and Alvarez (2010) in “At the crossroads of agency and communion: Defining the shared career” develop the notion of the shared career, drawing on a wide database of highly entrepreneurial and creative careers that have been shared by two or more individuals over extended periods of time. The authors help us realize how career agency can be deeply interdependent and that communion in careers need not weaken or distract from agency, but can serve as a supportive context for its expression. They develop this idea by attending to the connections between the features of practice, context, outcomes, and learning. While so much research examining collaboration in work can appear static, the life cycle model proposed by the authors teases out the connection between collaborative practice and the development of context, career outcomes and learning over time. Indeed, we come to see the learning of actors within a shared career as a critical determinant of its initiation, continuation or termination.

Jones’ (2010) “Finding a place in history: Symbolic and social networks in creative careers and collective memory” directs attention to social categorization processes that form two kinds of boundaries – social and symbolic – and thereby shape and limit career agency and outcomes such as professional recognition, over the course of one’s career and beyond. This article sheds new understanding on the contexts of career agency, differentiating between spheres of context that are within and beyond the influence of individual career actors. With regards to context, categorization processes represent social construction of a professional field by its practitioners (e.g. architects) and other observers (e.g. art critics). Jones also shows that individuals can influence these categorization processes to the extent that they practice boundary work, develop social networks, produce work collaboratively and, thereby, gain the recognition of their contemporaries. Yet, Jones also shows that individuals have no immediate influence on the symbolic boundaries which are drawn by critics and which influence career outcomes, such as the recognition of their work during late career stages and beyond death.

Higgins, Dobrow and Roloff (2010) in “Optimism and the boundaryless career: The role of developmental relationships” examine the relationship between the structure and quality of individuals’ developmental networks and optimism. Although optimism is only one ingredient in the wider notion of agency, Higgins and her co-authors make the case that it contributes to individuals’ flexibility and adaptability in challenging and stressful career situations. More significantly, the authors avoid an exclusively psychological orientation, strengthening an interdependent view of agency by suggesting that people’s relational context conveys career and psychosocial support that contributes to the development of optimism. In this respect, the observation that networks developed during business school are related to optimism at later career stages reinforces the importance of considering multiple contexts over time (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Pointing back to individual variations of agency, this observation implies that career benefits are not only derived from the supportive information that others convey in the moment, but that experiencing one’s embeddedness in strong social networks shapes cognitive and emotional representations that influences optimism over the long term.

In sum, the contributions to this special issue highlight the purpose of advancing research on agency in contemporary careers. We recognize that the articles contained in this collection do not suggest a simple, cohesive message. Rather, they offer a diverse range of complementary perspectives on boundaryless careers. Those adopting a psychological lens

place a greater emphasis on individual variations in career agency, whereas those being informed by sociological theory offer new understanding on social dynamics. However, the collection also defies strict disciplinary categorizations. In their entirety, these six articles have informed the proposed conceptualization of agency – both in terms of the proposed six features, and in the need to account for independent and interdependent aspects of careers.

## **Conclusions**

In this article we have argued for the promise of research that extends beyond a primary focus on boundaryless careers as particular career forms, and instead examines career dynamics that apply across a range of career forms. We see distinct promise in research that develops our understanding of interdependent notions of career agency. As illustrated by this collection of articles, this can inform our understanding of six features of agency related to its individual variation, social referencing, practice, outcomes, context, and learning. We submit that the framework proposed here can also guide further research. No single study can necessarily address all six features, nor should it be constrained by them. Nevertheless, the six features serve to highlight specific questions in need of further research.

Aside from refining career theory, further advance in our understanding of boundaryless careers will depend on the relevance of research with regards to changing economic and social arenas. A key impetus for the original formulation of the boundaryless career perspective was the profound socio-economic changes characterizing the 1990s, in particular the transition from organization-centric to more flexible and networked forms of organizing, and its implications for careers. A more permeable, open-systems view of organizations is now well established and has been extended beyond an initial focus on value chains (Miles & Snow, 1986) to questions about the wider responsibilities of organizations in society. As a consequence, the future relevance of the boundaryless career perspective will depend on its openness to the challenges of careers within an inherently dynamic, uncertain, and complex global society.

It is impossible to anticipate how careers will change in the years to come. Challenges such as systemic risk in global financial markets, changes in the provision of social services, and the depletion of natural resources increase the vulnerability of careers that are embedded within established modes of economic production. Yet, they also create opportunities for careers associated with social innovation (including the sustainable use of resources). These developments are likely to render some areas of professional expertise obsolete, but also create opportunities for fresh expertise and new collaborations. They raise profound questions about individuals' and institutions' adaptability in response to these transitions.

In sum, “sequences of job opportunities that go beyond the boundaries of single employment settings” (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1996: 116) will still command our attention in the future. In particular, the issues of agency and interdependence are gaining greater relevance within a changing global context. Moreover, the different features of agency suggest different assumptions about interdependence, a message reinforced by our contributing authors. On behalf of those authors, we submit the articles in this special issue, and the new directions that they represent, as our shared contribution to continuing debate.



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**Table 1 Career Agency from Independent and Interdependent Perspectives**

<b>Features of Agency</b>	<b>Emphasizing</b>	
	<b>Independence</b>	<b>Interdependence</b>
<b>Individual variation</b>	Personality, cognitions, affective states, expectancies, motives, and biographical variables, etc.	Culturally-shaped values and beliefs, and social identity (e.g. gender, organizational or professional membership)
<b>Social referencing</b>	Personal priorities, goals and criteria	Priorities derived from normative expectations, responsibility to significant others, reference group, institutions, and society
<b>Practice</b>	Individual behaviors and strategies, e.g.: job seeking, career self management, career change, identity work	Socially-embedded practices and collaboration, e.g. network brokering, membership in occupational groups, etc
<b>Outcomes</b>	Individual career outcomes (subjective and objective), e.g.: satisfaction, choice, achievement, job mobility, income and status	Collective, organizational, field-level and societal outcomes, e.g. HRM practices, industry creation
<b>Contexts</b>	Context as an external reality, distinct from the individual	Context as mutually enacted through collaborative practice; multilayered (e.g. micro/macro levels); changing over time
<b>Learning</b>	Individual experience, knowledge, expertise, reflection, adaptation of behaviors and career strategies	Learning as socially constructed, e.g. through socialization and relational learning